BY WHAT AUTHORITY?
Christianity and the Cults
Matthew 7:24-29
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Political theorists understand that freedom of religion is at the heart of a free society. Our courts understand that, and in most circumstances radically defend and protect that freedom. In the 1944 case of U.S. vs. Ballard, the United States Supreme Court held that "courts cannot question the 'content' or 'validity' of an individual's religious belief." In 1965 the Supreme Court amplified that ruling in the U.S. vs. Seeger by holding that "courts can only question the 'sincerety' of beliefs in limited circumstances and with great caution." (Psychology Today, January 1979, p.81, New Religious Groups: Membership and Legal Battles).

Ordinarily, American people appreciate the intent of those landmark judicial decisions and others like them. Ordinarily, American people understand how rare and fragile freedom of religion is: that a free society depends on it totally and that it must, by its very nature, be extended even to those whose views and practices are disagreeable, obnoxious and abhorrent to the majority. But then something like the miserable tragedy of Jonestown happens: 900 people die - people who meant well, were sincere, highly motivated, and protected by the United States Constitution, and many Americans begin to wonder about the system which allows it and sometimes seems to foster it. Christian people begin to worry about the extensiveness of the phenomenon and what it might be saying about our society and the traditional institutions of religion. Jonestown brought the reality of cult religion onto the front page - and into the center of our consciousness. And so it seemed appropriate to explore the subject in a sermon and to suggest some Christian understandings and responses.

How extensive is Cult Religion in America? No one seems to know for sure because it is one of the characteristics of cults to be secretive about internal matters. In addition some cults define the truth as whatever serves the purposes of the cult. Thus young people sell flowers to "help crippled children" when in fact the profits are providing a new limousine for the cult leader. Or the press asks a spokesperson about membership and is told there are 500,000 adherents when, in fact, there are 5,000. Truth is whatever promotes, protects and serves the cause of the cult.

In a recent book on the phenomenon two communication experts estimate that there are between 1,000 and 3,000 religious cults in the United States with a combined membership of approximately three million.

The Unification Church - or Moonies - claim 7,000 members in the United States. The two authors suggest that the core membership is half that. Hare Krishna claims 10,000 members. The Church of Scientology which has a branch several blocks east of here, claims 3.2 million members: the authors estimate 25,000. (This data from Psychology Today, ibid., p.81).

What is a cult? How shall we define the word? Carefully, I would suggest, because every religion must have looked like a cult to someone sometime. The Mormons, for instance, now a bastion of middle American respectability, were - a century ago - regarded as an unlikely cult, and in many ways, acted like one. One of the saddest cult stories on record is the harassment of the Mormons across the United States, including violence and murder: and the Mountain Meadows Massacre, September, 1857, in which Mormons and Indians killed 120 men, women and children in a party that was passing through Utah on the way to California. (See Time Magazine, 12/4/78).

Certainly John Wesley's Methodists appeared to be a cult to the Bishops of the Church of England. Surely the Pope and Roman Curia regarded Martin Luther as quite mad and his followers a bizarre sect group. And just as certainly the Sanhedrin, Jerusalem, circa 33 AD, well knew that it had a strange cult on its hands when Jesus of Nazareth and His ragtag friends came into the city in a parade to observe the Passover.

Time Magazine was less than objective when it defined cult several weeks ago as "a band of fierce believers who have surrendered themselves to obscure doctrine and a dangerous prophet." That, after all, sounds like a Republican Fund Raising banquet if you happen to be a Democrat; Democratic event, if you are Republican.

Margaret Thaler Singer, Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology at the University of California, who has studied and written extensively in the area, is more helpful by defining a cult as "a group involving an intense relationship between followers and a powerful idea or leader." (Psychology Today, 1/79, Coming Out of the Cults).

And yet, again, the definition could apply to a wide variety of groups organized intensely around a powerful idea. I shudder when I think about an entirely objective psychological analysis of what will transpire in this nation and in most of our homes at 4:00 p.m. today. For our purposes, may I suggest that a cult is an intense group relationship formed on an authoritarian figure or idea, which depends on self-perpetuating paranoia - "The whole world is against us" - a group which demands complete and utter commitment, involving suspension of those critical, reasoning faculties with which we try to do most of our living. Christianity finds most of what I just said offensive and dangerous.

In the beginning, however, it appears that nearly all successful groups - i.e., groups which survive - look like cults. I chose a text this morning which presents the fundamental question: the matter of authority. At the end of Matthew's colation of the Sermon on the Mount we encounter this significant little statement; "the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

That statement occurs enough times in the New Testament to convince even the skeptic that Jesus' authority was recognized and appreciated. It is almost always compared to the lack of authority displayed by the Scribes. They, by the way, were expected to be the authority figures in matters religious. They had the credentials, the education, the title and the position. What they didn't have apparently was something which, in the final analysis, can only be given by others, namely authority. Jesus had that. People gave it to Him.

The question which is raised and which, by the way, was asked of Jesus elsewhere, is, "By what authority does He teach? How do you know He's the real thing?" As you can sense it is not a superficial question. It is the main question raised by the phenomenon of cult religion.

Why did Jesus have authority? On what basis do you grant Him authority in your life? As I put that question to myself I come up with four answers. Jesus has authority for me, because what He said keeps making sense. Some cults require the individual to stop thinking rationally. I do not have to suspend my intellect in order to understand Him: in fact the reverse is true. His teaching invites me to think, critically, openly, intensely. I confess that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has

forced me to use my mind more than anything else in my life. Jesus has authority because He invites free and open inquiry. He had, and has authority because of His integrity. There was no hidden agenda: He, himself, lived what He taught. Unlike most of us there was a perfect symmetry between His words and His actions, He demonstrated what He believed and He died for it - and that honesty is always authoritative. Third, there are measurable results which occur because of what He said and did. People actually do become better people and the world a better place. Take away Jesus and you take away most of what is good about Western Civilization. And finally, His authority was, and is - for me, a result of His love. He cared deeply and authentically about his contemporaries: no fact is clearer than that. They followed Him up and down the Galilean countryside, all the way to Jerusalem and His cross, and I am convinced that it wasn't because He worked miracles, or "turned them on" like a first century charismatic media personality, or that He browbeat them into submitting to His will and personality - but simply because they sensed that this man was motivated by love - love for them, love uncluttered, unconditional, unapologetic. And so when He spoke, He did so with authority.

A Christian position on the phenomenon of Cult Religion begins here - at the point where Jesus becomes our authority. For the Christian Jesus becomes the standard by which we measure any person who claims leadership, any idea which claims our mind, or any movement which demands our obedience.

Why do people join cults in the first place? It seems that everyone has an opinion on this one. Dr. Singer, after studying people who have been involved in cults concludes that "about one third are very depressed people. The other two thirds are relatively average people, but in a period of depression, gloom, living at loose ends..." (Time Magazine, ob.cit.).

The Christian Century editorialized: "Jonestown and the People's Temple offered the obvious attraction of a close-knit, protective group with a strong component of security in return for the relinquishment of personal freedom." (12/13/78).

Robert Lifton, Psychology Professor at Yale, wrote in last week's New York Times Magazine that "Cults are a product of historical dislocation - of the loss and dishonoring of traditional symbols - their success reflects the impoverishment of opportunities for transcedence in our culture at large." (1/7/79).

At the heart of it all seems to be the matter of freedom. There is a line in Dostoyevsky that goes - "He has no more pressing need than the one to find somebody to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which he, the unfortunate creature, was born with." (The Brothers Karamazov - in Time, ob.cit.).

Freedom is difficult, risky: in times of stress, anxiety, threat - people can be persuaded to turn it in for security: the security of political dictatorship for instance; or the security of a kind of spiritual and intellectual dictatorship.

Dr. Singer suggests that when people are depressed, lonely, anxious, they are very vulnerable. A new recruit to one of the cults finds himself or herself surrounded by loving, caring people. Cut off from family and friends a new cult member is subjected to repeated infusions of cult doctrine, becomes tired, physically and emotionally, enters a kind of tr[illegible] and then something snaps, the same something that snaps when people are brainwashed. Erich Fromm in a famous study of the Nazi Movement called it "the retreat from freedom". Simply it is too difficult to resist

intellectually and spiritually. Something inside warns the individual that existence or sanity depends on submitting:and he/she does. The group and the leader become the most important thing in the world. Otherwise bright, stable people believe anything they are told and do what they are instructed to do - and feel very good about it.

The difficulty of living with freedom seems to be part of the appeal of the cults. But part of the appeal - at this particular time, I believe - is that cults promise immediate answers, immediate gratification, immediate solution. Part of their appeal is that we are living in a time which has spawned a socially acceptable celebration of selfishness. Tom Wolfe called us the "Me Generation". Dr. Paul Pruyser of the Menninger Foundation has written a scholarly paper under the title "Narcissism in Contemporary Religion" (Journal of Pastoral Care, 12/78, vol. XXXII, no. 4) in which he points to "a sharply increased concern with the self and a claim to pleasures of and for the self...I think we have here the beginnings of a rising cult of self-centeredness...self-actualization, self-enhancement, self-awareness, sensory self-stimulation..." (p.225-226).

The motif has, I believe, surfaced in religion. The whole "Born Again" movement appears at times, to be simply self-centeredness in pious disguise. The lurid confessions of a convicted sinner feel pretty good, after all, both to the voyeur in all of us and to the convert if she or he enjoys the attention of others. The insistence of gratification in all things spills over into the sanctuary: salvation must be mine, personally: I want to feel it, know it, experience it - it must be intense, personal and focused on me. It is, as you know, a winning and saleable litany in the religious market place today. People leave the Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian churches for independent "instant salvation" groups for precisely these reasons. They may not be cults - but the appeal is the same - it is called selfishness.

And part of our Presbyterian discomfort with it - whether it comes in one of the bizarre cults or a quasi Christian revival organization is that we still believe in Sin. There is no one in history more skeptical about power and authority than we Presbyterians. Whenever someone begins to accumulate too much of either we begin to get frightened. We believe sin is real: we believe any person is capable of acting badly. We are very dubious of organizations or institutions which give an individual much of an opportunity to do so. Our church is so tied up in participatory democracy that it is virtually impossible for an individual to accumulate power. Our highest officer is a Clerk and we distinctly distrust both individuals and groups who begin to sound like they have an exclusive hot-line to the Almighty. We Presbyterians believe even our church can sin. As a consequence we are able to laugh at our own pomposities on occasion. We have a sense of humor about ourselves and all others. And so we're simply incapable of taking an authority figure terribly seriously. That is our strength. The American Republic found it a helpful attitude to adopt when it was writing its Constitution. And, I would submit, it is a lesson our nation and culture - our young people - could continue to learn.

Mel Brooks, I find, is a very funny man. He is totally irreverent about the human condition which is what everyone should be. It's when we become reverent about humanity that people like Hitler or Jim Jones start thinking they're God. Brooks is not a Presbyterian but he was talking like one when he answered an interview question about morality. He said: "My standards of morality come from fear. And not only fear of God. I know how strong I am, how powerful I can be, how aggressive I can get. And I don't want a world where that kind of force can be

turned against me. That's why we all got to behave. That's the beginning of civil behavior. Fear of ourselves." (New Yorker, quoted by Martin E. Marty in Context 12/15/78).

Is there an answer or a resolution of some sort? In a sense I think the best we can do is know what is happening and try to understand a little of why it's happening which is why I have chosen to preach this sermon.

The answer, I believe, is not legislations. Shortly after the Jonestown disaster James Reston wrote a column answering the frantic calls for congressional investigations and legislation to restrict the function of cult groups. He quoted Supreme Court Justice Jackson, who wrote in an opinion "...the price of freedom of religion or of speech or of the press is that we must put up with and even pay for, a good deal of rubbish." (New York Times, 12/78).

I don't think the answer is in imitating the style of the cults. Some suggest that cults are successful because they are tightly disciplined and demand total commitment and that the church should be learning a lesson from the whole dynamic. That sounds persuasive, but it is not the answer. Restricting freedom, composing rules and regulations, is not it at all.

The answer is a renewal of the honest, caring, people-centered religion of Jesus. That Gospel, rightly understood, elevates and supports and celebrates the "individual". It tells the individual that true humanity means submitting to no one except Jesus Christ. Cults suggest that salvation means bowing down, surrendering - intellectually, spiritually and morally - before the leader or the group. The only answer to that is a religion that invites you to stand to full height, confident of God's love, kneeling only to pray.

What we can do - and what this society needs from its churches - is a little kindness and generosity and common human consideration. That doesn't seem like much, but in religion it is quite an accomplishment. One of my very favorite writers, Martin Marty, in a New Year's editorial, pled for "religion that blends commitment with civility, conviction with openness...There are no logical reasons why people who believe very deeply must close themselves off from people who hold to other truths. There are no theological reasons why passionate belief must produce so much narrowness, exclusiveness and persecuting spirit." (Context, 1/1/79).

In a sense the existence of the cults does indict the institutional church. But instead of feeling guilty, or worse yet, striking out in fear and anger, a far better response is simply to live the religion of Jesus: to love more, to be more tolerant, to forgive more and share more and reach out more.

Amen.

God, our Father, we are grateful for the freedom you give. Grant us courage to live with our freedom, exercising it responsibly. O God, we pray for brothers and sisters who are confused, lonely and lost. We pray for those who have traded integrity for security. Comfort them: and their loved ones. Make us more tolerant, but more strong - in the faith we know as the way, the truth and the life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.